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ABSTRACT

A number of sources have focused upon the lower socio-economic category of community college students and their success in completing a four-year college program. Some are pessimistic, claiming that very low percentages of two-year college students ever graduate from four-year college programs, and that most who drop out are from low income groups. Some sources explain these percentages with reference to the "stop out" phenomenon, others refute the contentions. Statistics show that, as of 1968, 49% of all community college students, but only 12.7% of transfer students, came from families with yearly incomes of less than $10,000. If the matrix of educational disadvantages and low educational aspirations can be broken by an educational institution, then the community college is in one of the best positions to do so. However, such an effort requires greater sensitivity on the part of college personnel, and specific programs to address the needs of economically disadvantaged students. One such effort was undertaken at Macomb County Community College. Almost 400 students from lower socio-economic families were placed in a highly structured, but autonomous, program of regular liberal arts courses. They were taught by 14 instructors and took their courses in blocks of time which kept them together as parts of small cohesive groups. The persistence rate of these students was much higher than that of the student body as a whole. (AYC)

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MATERIALLY DISADVANTAGED STUDENTS AND THE TRANSFER FUNCTION OF COMMUNITY COLLEGE

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MATERIALLY DISADVANTAGED STUDENTS AND THE TRANSFER FUNCTION OF COMMUNITY COLLEGE

The sources used in preparing this paper were designed to focus on the lower socio-economic category of community college students and discuss what, if any, success they have in completing a four year college program. This essay also examines the role which L. Steven Zwerling has claimed the community college system plays in the sociological composition of our nation. A role which he has identified as a "social defense mechanism which resists basic changes in the social structure."[1]

The findings which resulted from this particular examination contradicted the pessimistic statistics cited by Zwerling, and demonstrated that a surprising number of students benefited from a community college education. That is not to say that Zwerling's whole thesis is in error, but it is to argue that parts of Zwerling's case were grossly overstated. Specifically, Zwerling was apparently wrong in his assertion that only 12% of community college students ever graduate from four year institutions. Of course, he may be right if he is correct in stating that almost 75% of community college students drop out of college and <u>never</u> return.[2] This contention, however, ignores the current phenomenon of "stopout." James W. Thornton, for example, noted that 50% of community college freshmen quit after the first year, but he does not claim that their higher education careers have been permanently ended.[3] At any rate, the figures which Engin L. Holmstrom and Ann S. Bisconti cited from a 1968-1972 study showed that of the 51.9%

of community college students who transferred to four year institutions in 1968, 20% attained their baccalaureate and about 60% were still enrolled in upper level institutions four years after beginning their higher education careers.[4] Now, granted, these figures tell us nothing about the percentage of community college students who dropped out of school before they completed their first two years of college, but the thrust of such statistics indicates a much higher rate of success than that shown by Zwerling. On the other hand, these statistics also revealed that 20% of the initial transfer group had dropped out of senior-level education, and 48.1% of the remaining community college students never transferred to an institution of upper-level learning.[5] In addition, 54.3% of this latter group was composed of students who came from socio-economic backgrounds of less than $10,000 in yearly parental income (1968 dollars).[6] Such findings do not exactly vitiate Zwerling's conclusions. They do, however, put a considerable dent in his most depressing contentions.

Zwerling's greatest concern centered on the inability of the lowest segment of our community college population to break out of its socio-economic station in life. This was also a concern which Thornton addressed when he noted that community college personnel have a special obligation to develop attitudes and programs which will help to overcome the educational handicaps of materially deprived students.[7] After all, as of 1968, 49% of all community college students came from families with less than $10,000 in yearly income.[8] And, once such students are no longer regarded as intellectually inferior, many more of them may be "salvaged" for senior-level education. Since the statistics show that only 12.7% of transfer students now come from laboring and semi-skilled working class families, it is obvious much greater attention needs to be paid to this aspect of

our community college system.[9]

In Zwerling's opinion, the first step in that direction lies in the recognition that there is no such thing as a fixed intelligence, a value free objective test, a students psyche unaffected by his or her personal socio-economic and educational history.[10] Besides, other studies have demonstrated that one's socio-economic background is fundamental in affecting one's academic performance.[11] Thus, if the matrix of educational disadvantages and low educational aspirations, which spring from such a background, can be broken by an educational institution, then the community college is in one of the best positions to do so. The effort is one which calls for greater sensitivity on the part of community college personnel, and specific community college programs which address the needs of students from the lower end of the socio-economic ladder.

One such effort was undertaken in 1965-1966 at Macomb County Community College in Warren, Michigan. This one year program was identified by the letters E.C.D., and was designed to keep 393 students from lower socio-economic families from following the usual pattern in dropping out of school in the first year. These full-time students were placed in a highly structured, but autonomous program of regular liberal arts courses. They were taught by fourteen instructors and took their courses in blocks of time which kept them together as part of small cohesive groups. This procedure gave them group identity and made it harder for any of them to drop a single class. Rapport between students and instructors was facilitated by the smallness of the groups, and the courses were invigorated by numerous community projects and field trips. The students' complete participation

was further secured by their involvement in curriculum planning and instructor evaluation.

The results of this program were remarkable. At the end of the year, 60% of these students had earned between 25 and 33 units of credit. Only 25% of comparable regular liberal arts students did as well. Even more significant was the fact that, after the one year program had ended, almost 25% of the students who had been in it finished their community college careers with 55 or more units of credit. Once again, only 10% of the regular liberal arts students did as well. In other words, this college broke the chain of educational failure which had held many of these students in bondage for years. Their success in a one year program led to their success in the following year. And, three times as many of them as their non-E.C.D. counterparts ended by graduating from Macomb.[12]

Community colleges serve a heterogeneous group of students with a wide diversity of interests. Still, there is one group of students that looks with special hope upon the opportunities which the community college can offer them. As the products of a lower socio-economic environment, these students cannot be expected to perform well in college unless they encounter an extraordinarily sympathetic staff and special programs designed to meet their needs. Such colleges may salvage the intellectual talents of up to 50% of our community college citizenry.

Notes

[1]L. Steven Zwerling, Second Best: The Crisis of the Community College (New York, 1976), pp. xiii, xviii-xix.

[2]Ibid., xiii-xiv.

[3]James W. Thornton Jr., The Community Junior College (New York, 1972), p. 150.

[4]Engin L. Holmstrom and Ann S. Bisconti, "Transfer form Junior to Senior College, Final Report," American Council on Education, Washington, D.C. Office of Research, 1974, ERIC, ED 093422, pp. 70, 42-43.

[5]Ibid., pp. 43, 70.

[6]Ibid., P. 74

[7]Thornton, pp. 150-152.

[8]Holmstrom and Bisconti, p. 74.

[9]Ibid., p. 73.

[10]Zwerling, pp. 123-139.

[11]George W. Mayeske, "On the Explanation of Racial-Ethnic Group Differences in Achievement Test Scores," Paper delivered at American Psychological Association Meeting, 1971. Mayeske, a psychologist with the U.S. Office of Education, demonstrated that U.S. schools reflect the social structure of U.S. society and tend to perpetuate and increase the differential learning which students bring to those schools by reason of socio-economic status and birth. His study is cited in Allan Chase, The Legacy of Malthus: The Social Costs of the New Scientific Racism (New York, 1977), pp. 501-502 f.

[12]Sara Chalghian, "Success for Marginal Students," Junior College Journal, 40 (April 1970), 28-29.

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